DUCKCREK

Golden Anniversary Renovation

Ducks, Groceries, and Water Depth

As you drive around your favorite wetland area in the fall, do you ever wonder why there is a pile of ducks in certain spots and not in others? Well, like many things in nature there probably isn't just one reason. However, one contributing factor that might not immediately pop in your head is "water depth". Different species of waterfowl prefer different water depths when it is time to eat.

Most folks don't like to work harder than they have to, especially when it comes to food. Think about the last time you went to the grocery store. Odds are you picked up most of you food from the shelves that were right in front of you or perhaps a little lower. If there was something on the top self and out of reach, you probably thought twice about making the extra effort and picked something else. Ducks are the same way. They prefer food that is in reach.

Each species has a set of tools or characteristics that lets them forage efficiently. The bill size and shape, body size, and location of their feet help them reach these food items. For example, teal are small birds and don't have quite the "reach" that larger birds do.

They are often seen foraging in shallow water (<4 inches) and mud flats. Mallards are larger birds and are often found in deeper bodies of water (3-7 iniches). When food isn't available on the water's surface, they tip their tail ends up in the air and reach further down in the water column. This is called dabbling. They can only reach as far as their neck can stretch so the maximum water depth for them to forage efficiently is about 15 inches. Diving ducks, like Ring-necked Ducks, have their feet positioned further back on their body. This helps them dive by propelling their body towards food in deeper water (>10 in).

When managing for waterfowl, biologists have to think about making the food available for migrating waterfowl. Flooding habitats with shallow water gradually throughout the season ensures that some food is always available and not out of reach for migrating waterfowl. So next time you are at the grocery store or out on an area looking for that spot where the ducks just want to be, think about water depth and whether or not the ducks can reach their groceries.



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